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[Medieval Georgia]

THE MIDDLE AND LOWER CLASSES

Vadcharni—the merchants—constituted a separate social class, as is evident from the *sigelni* (charters) of the Catholicos Melkisedeki,[1] dating from the year 1020, wherein they are mentioned for the first time. The earlier literary sources preserve very little information about them, from which it is to be deduced that in the remoter times the merchants commanded little or no influence in the political life of the country. From the eleventh century they are, however, comparatively frequently mentioned.

The merchants were divided into two main groups—*did-vadcharni*, the great merchants, and *vadcharni*, the merchants. The great merchants participated in the affairs of state; the King not infrequently appointed ambassadors from among them, and they were sometimes accorded civil appointments. Some public prosecutors, for instance, were from the merchant class.

The group of *vadcharni* was of course more numerous, and their position differed greatly from that of the "great merchants". While the latter were free and participated in the political life of the country, the former included many who were not free, being the slaves of others, and they could be bought and sold like the ordinary serfs.[2]

The merchants possessed their own organizations and associations and were under a *Vadchart-Ukhutsesi*[3]—the Chief of the Merchants. Unfortunately, however, no indication has been preserved as to whether he was elected by the merchants themselves or was appointed by the King. *The Man in the Panther's Skin* indicates the fact that the merchants wore a distinctive dress or uniform of their own.[4]

The Georgian literary sources give very little information about the position of the artisans, and it is rather difficult to state whether socially they formed a social group such as the *msakhurni* or the peasant class. From the work of Abuseridze Tbeli we can glean that in the twelfth century —and it may be inferred that even earlier—there existed in Georgia artisans who maintained themselves and their families by their labour and that they were free; for they seem to have been able to move freely about the country and even to go abroad to gain their livelihood.

The word *qma* or *qrma* in the sense of serf or slave is first

[1] See Th. Jordania, *Kronikebi da Skhva Masalebi Sakartvelos Istoriisa* (*The Chronicles and other Materials of Georgian History*), II, 33.
[2] See Jordania, *Ibid.*, II, 33.
[3] See *The Man in the Panther's Skin*, by Sh. Rusthaveli, English Edition by M. Wardrop.
[4] *Ibid.* See Quatrain 1058.